

Relations

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*Energy Ethics: Emerging Perspectives
in a Time of Transition*

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Part II

STUDIES AND RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

Energy Ethics: a Literature Review <i>Giovanni Frigo</i>	177
Contesting the Radical Monopoly: a Critical View on the Motorized Culture from a Cyclonaut Perspective <i>Damien Delorme</i>	215
Desiring Ethics: Reflections on Veganism from an Observational Study of Transitions in Everyday Energy Use <i>Alice Dal Gobbo</i>	233
Ethical Risk and Energy <i>Bertrand Andre Rossert</i>	251
Coal Feeds My Family: Subsistence, Energy, and Industry in Central Appalachia <i>M. Joseph Aloï</i>	269
Human Energy: Philosophical-Anthropological Presuppositions of Anthropogenic Energy, Movement, and Activity and Their Implications for Well-being <i>Roman Meinhold</i>	287

COMMENTS, DEBATES, REPORTS AND INTERVIEWS

Energy Ethics Outside the Box: Carl Mitcham in Conversation with Giovanni Frigo <i>Carl Mitcham - Giovanni Frigo</i>	301
Energy Equality and the Challenges of Population Growth <i>Andrea Natan Feltrin</i>	313
The Energy of Ethics / The Ethics of Energy: a Dialog with Irigaray, Varela and Jullien <i>Federico Battistutta</i>	321

REVIEWS

Alex Epstein, <i>A Review of the Moral Case for Fossil Fuels</i> (2014) <i>Adam Briggie</i>	331
Author Guidelines	335

Cherry Picking Coal

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Epstein, Alex. 2014. *A Review of the Moral Case for Fossil Fuels*. New York: Penguin. 248 pp. € 15.24. ISBN 978-1591847441.

When it comes to the environment, the Trump administration looks like a repeat of the Reagan administration. Reagan appointed James Watt as Secretary of the Interior and Anne Gorsuch Burford as EPA Administrator. Both were hostile to the very institutions they were leading and the legislation they were supposed to implement. They pursued deregulation with zeal. The same is true of the Trump administration with Ryan Zinke as Secretary of the Interior, Scott Pruitt as head of the EPA, and Rick Perry as Head of the Department of Energy. Zinke has overseen the largest reduction in federal lands protection in U.S. history, Pruitt sued the EPA 14 times (working with the oil and gas industry) when he was Attorney General of Oklahoma, and in his bid for President, Perry vowed to abolish the DOE. Andrew Wheeler, who took over the EPA after Pruitt's resignation, was a lobbyist for the coal producer Murray Energy.

Julian Simon was the man who supplied the philosophy (or maybe ideology?) for the Reagan administration. It goes like this: Scarcity is just another name for an increase in price. When prices go up on a free market, entrepreneurs and engineers have an incentive to find more of a resource or a replacement for it. When they succeed, prices go back down and prosperity ratchets up. The environment gets cleaner as people get richer. Human ingenuity hitched to the free market can solve any problem as long as Big Government and its stifling, market-distorting regulations are kept in check.

Alex Epstein, who runs the Center for Industrial Progress, is the Trump administration's Julian Simon. His 2014 book, *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels* (MCFE), is treated like a holy text among the idea makers who both shape and sell the Trump administration's full-throated embrace of fossil fuels via its agenda of "energy dominance". One example comes from a recent America First Energy Conference hosted by

the right-wing Heartland Institute. There, Heath Lovell, Vice President of Public Affairs at Alliance Coal, said “We have a moral obligation” to export coal to poor countries, so that the rest of the world can “live like we do”. Lovell brandished Epstein’s book in the air as he made the case for exporting coal. Everyone in the room – fossil fuel executives and policymakers – knew the book well.

Simon, the optimist, sparred with the ecologist Paul Ehrlich, who was convinced ecological doom was just around the corner. Simon beat Ehrlich in a famous wager, where five commodity metals actually became cheaper in the 1980s despite the fact that all were being intensively used for industrial development. Simon’s point was that the human brain (the “ultimate resource”) actually makes natural resources *less* scarce and thus cheaper. Ehrlich said that Simon was like a man who jumped from a tall building and reports on his way down, passing by the fifth floor, that everything is fine. Eventually, we will hit natural limits. Or: past performance is no guarantee of future success.

Epstein updated this duel by taking on Bill McKibben, our contemporary Ehrlich-like doomsayer, in a debate. It is all so much *déjà vu*. Indeed, much of the script for MCFF comes straight out of Simon’s playbook. Epstein argues that: (a) as we use more resources and grow the economy, the environment actually improves; (b) doomsayers like McKibben err in not considering all the benefits of technology and all the risks of regulations; (c) nature is almost always more dangerous than technology; (d) the media exaggerate bad news because it sells, so always research data on your own; and most importantly (e) the ultimate standard for measuring whether something is good or bad, right or wrong is *human flourishing*. Given that he takes all this conceptual architecture from Simon, it is surprising that Epstein only gives him a passing mention in MCFF.

But there is a crucial difference between these two thinkers. Simon put his money on a process, whereas Epstein is betting on a substance. Simon championed the dialectic of human ingenuity and free markets in a way that was agnostic or neutral about any given resource. For example, people want cheap, reliable television in their homes. If copper cable becomes expensive, then switch to fiber optic or satellite or something not even dreamed up yet. People don’t actually want copper. It is a mere means to get them the commodious, comfortable life that both Simon and Epstein take to be the universal standard of human flourishing.

Epstein’s MCFF, though, is a different kettle of fish. It is making the moral case for a certain kind of resource, not a process that is agnostic about resources. He is aware of this. “Ultimately”, he writes, “the

moral case for fossil fuels is not about fossil fuels" (34). That is a telling admission. Rather, "it's the moral case for using cheap, plentiful, reliable energy to amplify our abilities to make the world [...] a better place *for human beings*" (34; emphasis in original). Epstein believes that "no other energy technology can even come close to producing that energy for the foreseeable future" (34).

By pinning his faith on a resource rather than a creative process, Epstein, the would-be disciple of Simon, betrays his master. Simon, was a neoliberal (a free-market fundamentalist) and a technological optimist. Epstein wants us to think he is the same, but his allegiance to fossil fuels trips him up in two related ways. First, he can only champion technological creativity and markets when they favor his chosen fuels. Second, he sets up all of his arguments to systematically discount the downsides of fossil fuels while hyping their positives. The result of these strategies is a book of half-truths.

Consider the first strategy. The thing about modern technology in a capitalist society is that the ends (commodities) will be provided through whatever means are cheapest and most efficient. Thus, because fossil fuels are mere means, they are vulnerable despite all their power. Witness the decline of coal, which is being partially cannibalized within the fossil fuel industry by natural gas. But it is also increasingly defeated on electricity markets by solar and wind. Indeed, solar prices are plummeting so rapidly that forecasts from a few years ago are worthless now. Epstein also ignores the fact that governments structure markets in all sorts of ways, thereby picking winners and losers in energy. The fact that carbon does not have a price constitutes an enormous subsidy for fossil fuels. Military interventions abroad do the same thing. This is the other half of the truth you won't find in MCFF.

Epstein's fuel-favoritism is mirrored in the Trump administration which has sought ways to prop up coal through government mandate and to give a boost to oil and gas by opening up federal lands and waters and stripping states of their rights to require greater vehicle fuel efficiency standards. This is not as simple as "the invisible hand" automatically picking the best forms of energy. It is a government-led effort to systematically put its thumb on the scales for fossil fuels. With his one-sided, resource-centered philosophy, Epstein provides moral cover for this approach. It's hard to claim MCFF is a free-market, techno-optimist book when it greases the wheels for making market distortions (for fossil fuels) and either ignores or gives systematically pessimistic interpretations about some of the most exciting technological developments going on (in renewables). Say what you will about Simon's philosophy, but at

least he rooted for dynamism. Epstein has produced an anthem to the status quo.

Now consider the second strategy where Epstein puts fossil fuels in front of a funhouse mirror that has the effect of ballooning their upsides and eliminating their downsides. Climate change, of course, is the elephant he makes disappear with some breezy cherry picking. Indeed, he argues that we are not taking a safe climate and making it dangerous through greenhouse gas emissions. Rather, we are taking a dangerous climate (prone to floods, fires, etc.) and making it safe by using fossil fuels to build shelters from the storms.

He has a point. But again it is only part of the story. We are in fact doing both – increasing and decreasing risks. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change continues to issue ever more dire warnings and urgent calls to decarbonize the global economy. Epstein responds with a handful of charts and a reminder that CO₂ is, after all, *fertilizer*. If anything, fossil fuels have the knock-on bonus of greening the planet by fertilizing the atmosphere. Some of this is simply bad science on his part. Most of it, though, is the kind of thing that reams of climate research make possible. Given the enormous amount of data out there, it is easy enough to find the studies you like best and give them a spin that suits your agenda.

Epstein claims to be doing philosophy in MCFF. I would rather call it sophistry. By that I mean the clever reduction of a complex, multi-sided issue into a simple moral formula: more fossil fuels = more flourishing. That more fossil fuels might also equal the end of civilization is neatly excised, along with all of the other negatives. Sophistry is also a political philosophy, because the assurance and clarity it produces are used to justify the behavior (and soothe the conscience) of the powers that be. To settle for half-truths is not to pursue wisdom.

Of course fossil fuels have been a tremendous benefit to humanity, but they also exact a steep and growing toll on the planet. MCFF only gives us one side of the story. Insofar as it is being used to justify similarly one-sided energy policies, it just might be the most dangerous book about energy ever written.